

Franco Moretti, ed. *The Novel. Vol. II: Forms and Themes*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. 950 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-691-13473-4.

Take a form, follow it from space to space, and study the reasons for its transformations.

—Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2007)

It is difficult to bracket Franco Moretti's controversial ideas about "distant reading" in approaching this two-volume, 2000-page anthology. William Deresiewicz calls *The Novel* "an impressive achievement ... precisely because Moretti was so willing to include perspectives that diverge sharply from his own" (2). In fact, Moretti's explicit presence in the collection is minimal: an essay in Volume I and a five-paragraph foreword, common to both volumes, that defines the project: "to make the literary field longer, larger, and deeper ... and then, project within a project, to take a second look at the new panorama—and estrange it" (x). The very origin of *The Novel* defamiliarizes the genre a bit for an American reader brought up on Ian Watt; this English version is an abridged translation of the five-volume *Il Romanzo*, published in Italian in 2001-2003, and dedicated to the exploration of the novel "as the first truly planetary form" (ix), and, in Eric Bulson's words, "without relying on national categories" (2). The collection is successful on all counts: it establishes the novel's impact for more than 2000 years and on six continents. And although Moretti's other work might inform our understanding of this massive undertaking, it by no means overdetermines it: the selections are rich, global, labyrinthine—and novel.

As a reference work (Princeton's designation), *The Novel* does not offer particularly easy access. Moretti's short foreword describes only the "registers" of Volume 2's five Parts: long "essays ... that establish the great periodizations that segment the flow of time, and the conceptual architecture that reveals its unity"; and much shorter "readings" pursuing a "common question" in a specific novel (x). Comprehensive "Author" and "Works Cited" indices provide a snapshot of both the range of works and the recurring figures, but *The Novel* offers no précis of its content. Reading through the selections, one feels lost on familiar terrain—but the challenge of finding one's way provides the power of the collection. It demands to be read. Closely.

The title of Part 2.1, "The Long Duration," plays on *le longue durée*, the model for Moretti's "distant readings," which "focus on units that are

much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems” (“Conjectures on World Literature” 57). The essays in 2.1 propose a “historical morphology” of the novel, as the subtitle of the first suggests; all implicitly refute Watt’s “parochialism”¹ as they begin unapologetically with the Greek Novel. Massimo Fusillo, for example, not only contextualizes Watt’s influence but also deconstructs assumptions about “Epic, Novel” since Hegel. The essays treat the novel as (something like) a historical structure, each moving from the Greek Novel to the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. The “Readings” in the section that follows, “Prototypes,” are arranged chronologically (this chronology obtains in subsequent “Readings” sections); some address early manifestations of the novel form itself (*Aethiopika*, *Maqāmat*, *Lazarillo des Tormes*), others a particular type (for example, *The Kingdom of this World* as “real-maravilloso”).

If Part 2.1 echoes Moretti’s previous work, Part 2.3, “Themes, Figures,” is paradigmatic of this one. Nancy Armstrong’s “The Fiction of Bourgeois Morality and the Paradox of Individualism” traces in British novels the paradox of “assertion[s] of pure individuality” in a form whose goal is to resolve the protagonist’s “social identity” (349). The following essays similarly explore individual protagonists’ resistance to social expectations, until Fredric Jameson recasts the problem in “A Businessman in Love,” arguing that the main character of Boleslaw Prus’s novel *Lalka* (1889) will remain foreign to us (and Prus’s novel underappreciated) as long we read him in terms of the “bourgeois morality” Armstrong identifies. Two sections of “Readings” follow: the first, “Narrating Politics,” follows Jameson’s cue, pursuing the centrality of politics, and particularly colonialism, in novels by writers such as Multatuli, Lu Hsün, Fenoglio, Achebe, and Vargas Llosa; the second, “The Sacrifice of the Heroine,” pursues its topic in more familiar works, including *War and Peace* (1865–1869), *Nana* (1880), and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891). The juxtaposition is itself provocative: the temptation is to regard the novels read in first section as non-*something*—non-canonical? non-Western?—in light of the second section, and yet the categories do not hold. And while the readings have in common something like fractured subjectivity, the contexts in which such fracture emerges are sufficiently diverse to resist categorization.

Part 2.4, “Space and Story,” which treats the construction of space in the novel, achieves a similarly disorienting effect. Mieke Bal’s “Over-

1. See Doody 1.

writing as Un-writing: Descriptions, World-Making, and Novelistic Time” provides a beautifully crafted deconstruction of the tendency to privilege “narrative” over “description.” Though Bal’s treatment of individual novels is historically inflected, her conclusion is theoretical: “the nature of the novel lies” in the “tension” between “an unlimited texture” referenced by description and “a text with a beginning and an end, aesthetically correct” (607). Phillip Fisher’s analysis of *Ulysses* (1918-1920), on the other hand, finds in the specific spaces of Bloom’s (and James Joyce’s) Dublin “an objectified form of the general human will” (683); this essay provides the segue to the “Readings” section, seven distinct depictions of “The New Metropolis.” Each treats more or less directly both a city and a literature facing (usually political) disruption: Shanghai, Buenos Aires, Lagos, Cairo, Havana, Bombay, and Istanbul. As the readings probe text, city, and protagonist in terms familiar to most readers, they also suggest that some of these cities must remain foreign (we cannot be from all of them), subject to a history we can read about but that has not shaped us in the way it has shaped the novelist, the protagonist, and possibly even the critic. The volume ends with “Uncertain Boundaries”—“where” we are both temporally (the present) and theoretically at the end of our reading. Arguably every essay in the collection pushes at some boundary—whether it is the site of the origin of the novel (for now, 2000 years ago, in Greece) or the very medium (as in the volume’s last essay, Espen Arseth’s description of digital narratives).

In his review, discussing the anti-humanist tendencies of some of Moretti’s methods, Deresciewicz insists that, “[l]iterary power is the power to tell stories in a way that makes them persuasively representative, that makes you feel like the author is talking about *you*” (2, my emphasis). Perhaps the great achievement of *The Novel* is that it relentlessly problematizes “sameness and difference,” and so any tendency to look for “yourself” in the novels of the planet. Volume 2 introduces us to a (literal) world of novels we may never have read otherwise, and reminds us, whoever “we” are, that the subjects represented might well be quite strange.

The frustrations of reading *The Novel* are not only minor, they are productive. It is not a beginner’s book: the contributors are some of the pre-eminent (and occasionally more difficult) literary scholars working today. But I would—*will*—recommend any number of the essays to my more accomplished students. Bulson addresses the only real flaw I found in the collection: “Moretti ... was forced to downsize *Il romanzo* because the

American editors were afraid it wouldn't sell. ... Much of the international context was cut out to accommodate an Anglo-American public" (3). From this reader's perspective, *The Novel* could be much longer—and even stranger. But even in its abridged form, it is an incredible achievement.

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